

## Epiphany, January 4<sup>th</sup> 2026

### 6.00 Evening Prayer, All Saints Oakham

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Today we celebrate the feast of Epiphany. In its secular form an epiphany is defined as *a moment of sudden and great revelation or realization*

In Christian terms it is about the revealing of Jesus to different groups. In the prayer book, the feast is subtitled “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles”, the gentiles in this case being the Magi. It is also associated with the baptism of Jesus, the revealing of who Jesus was to John and the crowds that came to baptism; and with the wedding at Cana in Galilee, the revealing of Jesus’s power to his followers.

All very grand themes, and I will come back to them later, but I want to begin by telling you about a much more mundane epiphany of my own. As with many of a certain age, I have, over the last 10 or 15 years, become interested in tracing my family tree and the development of databases such as those marketed by Ancestry have made it possible to do this without leaving the house and travelling around record offices. My particular family tree is made a bit unusual in that my mother’s maiden name was Baker, so I have two “Baker” lines to follow down the generation. Looking at my mother’s line, my first epiphany, if that is not too grand a word for it, came probably about 15 years ago, when I realised that my grandmother Miriam’s and grandfather John’s marriage and the arrival of their first child were really rather closer together than they should have been. This made me smile to be honest. I never knew my grandfather, but my grandmother was always a very respectable older lady, a stalwart of the local methodist church’s Ladies Bible Class. I would never have thought of her as having a somewhat wayward youth. Her husband John remained a bit of a mystery however – there were no records of military service in World War 1 as was the case with his brothers and, in retrospect, very little information about his came from my mother.

Thus it was to rest until recently. Some 40 years ago, my mother gave me some small diaries or notebooks from 1907 to 1920 from her grandfather William – John’s father and Miriam’s father-in-law. Sandy and I transcribed some of them at the time, but they were put away and not really looked at for many decades. They came to light again recently and I decided it really was time to look at them and see what they contained. There is a lot of interesting if fragmented material on the life of the Black Country village in which he lived, and the iron works where he was employed. From these diaries it is possible to trace something of his son John’s early life – and in particular it seems he received compensation for an industrial accident that occurred at a mine when he was in his mid teens. I suspect that whatever happened to him, created some long term issues which meant he could not enlist in the army – and was never conscripted when that became the norm. That in turn would I expect have led to social problems, with all his peers joining the forces. But after his marriage to Miriam, John ceases to be mentioned in William’s

diaries – and indeed Miriam and the marriage is never alluded to, the silence perhaps indicating some sort of family split. Miriam's mother had died just months before the marriage, and in some ways it was an escape from the responsibilities of looking after younger siblings. But a second epiphany was still to come. A note in the diary indicates just three months after the marriage Miriam's father, James, was killed in a mining accident – and the brief press reports describe it as a roof fall. The inquest verdict was accidental death – no blame attributed to mine owners at all. That was how it was. But curiously this, more than anything else in my family tree searches, was the event that has made me more angry at the injustice of it all than any other; the cheapness of life in the Black Country at the time. The outcome was however that Miriam had to resume her sibling responsibilities as well as looking after her own children and a young iron work labourers meagre salary. But on reflection the events, the issues of John not enlisting, a hastily arranged marriage, little financial resource and so on, also seemed to me to explain something about my own family life – a sense of social insecurity, especially in my mother, with a desperation for "respectability" – an insecurity from which I am not immune. So after many years I perhaps had a rather fuller epiphany than my first rather amused one.

So a series of personal experiences, but ones that followed on from each other, and involved reflection, some digging out of information and a bit of work. My reason for sharing it at some length is that I wonder if this offers a pattern to some degree, that epiphanies need to be worked at, to be reflected on to find their full meaning. For John the apostle, the revelation of Jesus' power at the Cana wedding would have been an amazing thing. He had been attracted by Jesus's teaching enough to follow him, and now he was showing that he could create an alcoholic drink out of water. What's not to like for a band of young male followers! But this, and the other miracles that he witnessed, not least that of the resurrection, moved things onto a different plane. And John kept these things in his mind, mulled them over, thought through the implications, and 40 years or so later was to write of this same person who had turned water into wine

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

The little epiphany at Cana led, over many years to the greater epiphany of realising that Jesus was the one through whom all things were made.

And perhaps we see something of this double epiphany in the lives of Christians down the years. Mother Julian famously had sixteen visions over the course of a couple of days – and spent several decades mulling over their significance, and writing down what they gradually revealed to her of God.

C S Lewis, as a child found himself moved beyond understanding by the Nordic myth of the dying god Balder as represented in a poem by Longfellow

*Balder the beautiful is dead, is dead!*

This love of and respect for Norse Mythology was to remain with him throughout his life. Later, as a strong atheist in his teenage years, he read the book *Phantasies* by George

MacDonald, a mythic, dream-like adventures in fairyland, where the narrator confronts tree-spirits and the shadow, sojourns to the palace of the fairy queen, and searches for the spirit of the earth. McDonald was, unbeknown to Lewis a Christian, and his story touched deep into Lewis's heart and showed him that there was something beyond his atheism. After much intellectual struggle, he finally gave in.

*That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. I finally gave in and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.*

A then some while later, after long discussions with friends including one J R R Tolkien, he came to see how those mythical stories that made such an impression on him were pointing to what he describes as the “true myth” of Jesus – the place where the beauty of myth and poetry meets the objective reality of the incarnation. He describes a motorcycle and sidecar journey to an Oxford Zoo

*When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, but when we reached the zoo I did. I had not exactly spent the journey in thought, nor in great emotion. It was more like when a man, after a long sleep, still lying motionless on the bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.*

The lesser epiphanies of Balder and Phantasies, thought about, reflected on over the years, led to the greater. And perhaps that is the point to reflect on. What “epiphanies” have we experienced in the past? How has God spoken to us, or what new insights has he given to us over the years. At the start of the year, are there things we should revisit, mull over in the light of the experience of intervening years, so that these old epiphanies might become new and fresh once more. The lesser epiphany leading to the greater?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen